

Out of the Realm of Immanence:
Women's Work and Transcendence in the Novels of Carol Shields.

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Abstract

Carol Shields has not always been acknowledged as a feminist thinker by scholars, but an examination of women's work and art in her novels shows how her novels employ the feminist theories of Simon de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan in the creation of her own feminist philosophy. De Beauvoir's ideas on transcendence and immanence find expression in Shields's novels, *A Fairly Conventional Woman*, *The Stone Diaries*, and *Unless*, as her female characters use work (both domestic and artistic) to transcend powerlessness.

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Dedication

For my parents, Rick and Ruth. And for Tim, Danny, Bekah, Lisa, and Linsay.

In her 1987 novel *Swann*, Carol Shields provides a detailed description of a middle-aged woman at work in a library. The passage is replete with details some might call mundane, yet it also contains Shields's understated but significant comment, "It is almost, one might say, ordained for women of Rose's age and occupation to huddle over hotplates in ill-ventilated storerooms" (*Swann* 123). In her use of the word "ordained," Shields's language is suggestive of Simone de Beauvoir's fear that women are "doomed to immanence" (73, 248, 643), or what Shields refers to as "the problem of how to get through a thousand ordinary days" (*Stone Diaries* 263). However, in her 1991 article, "Still in the Kitchen: The Art of Carol Shields," Laura Groening argues that while Carol Shields's novels "celebrate the world of a certain kind of woman who is perhaps under-regarded in today's world, they most certainly do not welcome feminism as a way to alleviate frustration or powerlessness" (14). Groening fails to acknowledge that Shields is not celebrating the under-regarded woman or the smallness of her everyday life, but is in fact creating an image of powerlessness through her depiction of typical women's work. Shields's fiction repeatedly suggests, however, that transcendence for women can be found in meaningful work. Her feminist consideration of work is increasingly evident in three novels that span more than twenty years and demonstrate the influence of Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir.

In her essay, "A View from the Edge of the Edge," Shields talks about women's writing as being voices we've "always wanted" to hear, saying, "we needed Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan to come along and tell us we were smarter than we thought" (27). She refers to Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in several interviews and makes explicit reference to it in *The Stone Diaries*. As Wendy Roy deals with Shields's use of

Friedan in both *The Stone Diaries* and *A Fairly Conventional Woman*, I will primarily trace de Beauvoir's philosophy in Shields's fiction. Shields's mention of de Beauvoir, unlike her discussion of Friedan both in her interviews and fiction, is brief. However, de Beauvoir's ideas on transcendence form the basis of much feminist thinking, and Shields's work is an artistic expression of the need for female transcendence espoused by de Beauvoir. Considering Shields's work in light of de Beauvoir's theories not only illuminates Shields's own feminist philosophy, but also situates Shields's herself in the larger feminist community by demonstrating that she does indeed use a feminist approach to women's work. Immanence for Shields is not only expressed in a daily powerlessness or frustration, but in a relegation to mere goodness, instead of greatness. Through discussions of work and art, Shields creates female characters who aspire to both greatness and transcendence over the everyday.

In her pivotal book, *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir puts forth the idea that woman "finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to stabilize her as object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another" (xxix). In her discussion of marriage she explicitly connects immanence to domestic work by asserting that "woman is doomed to the continuation of the species and the care of the home—that is to say, to immanence" (430). Feminist scholar Elaine Stavro neatly paraphrases de Beauvoir's philosophy as the idea that "man embodies transcendence, the world of freedom, while woman is relegated to the realm of immanence, the dull repetition of life" (447). In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett uses de Beauvoir's concept to criticize Henry Miller for staving off "the threat of sexual revolution—woman's transcendence of the

mindless material capacity he would assign her” by “trafficking with her only in [his] utopian fantasies” (409).¹ Shields’s characters lead lives far from utopian fantasies; in fact, many of her characters are part of this realm of immanence, consigned to the dull repetition of domestic life, which could easily turn to the “mindless material capacity” Millet is concerned with. Each of the protagonists in the books with which this paper deals exhibit aspects of immanence, in terms of the dailiness of running a household, and yet each is redeemed by some form of meaningful or artistic work. The 1982 *A Fairly Conventional Woman* (later re-titled *Happenstance: The Wife’s Story*) shows Brenda Bowman, a “typical” housewife, in the process of coming to understand her quilting as both meaningful work and art. In Shields’s 1993 *The Stone Diaries*, Daisy Goodwill Flett is the subject of Shields’s most extended study of a woman’s too-often-invisible life, the transcendence made possible for a woman through her work, and the consequences of the loss of that work. Finally, the crescendo of Shields’s feminist consideration of women and work is found in the 2002 novel *Unless*, Shields’s last novel before her death, and one that is fittingly her most philosophically complete and explicit. In this novel, the sometimes subtle feminism of Shields’s earlier work takes on new dimensions and becomes the very structure on which the novel is built, as protagonist Reta Winter’s literary work is powered by grief at a daughter who has been denied her place in the world – has instead been consigned to immanence.

Critical essays by many writers such as Sarah Gamble, Susan Grove Hall, Lisa Johnson, Dianne Osland, and Wendy Roy have addressed various aspects of Shields’s use of women’s work either in terms of domesticity or art. Although several of these critics’ arguments are essential to my discussion, none has explicitly considered either the

domestic or female creativity in terms of transcendence. Gamble's "Filling the Creative Void: Narrative Dilemmas in *Small Ceremonies*, the *Happenstance* Novels, and *Swann*" is largely about "the figure of the writer" (41); Gamble does consider Brenda's work as a quilter in comparison with her husband's work as a writer, but her interest is mostly in "the limitations of narrative" (50), and the way that Shields explores or evades these limitations through both characters' work. In "The Duality of the Artist/Crafter in Carol Shields's novels," Hall is interested in whether Shields's artist figures "are meant to or do embody genuine artistry" (42). Osland explores "the criteria of tellability" (91) established by traditional narrative structure in her essay "*The Stone Diaries*, *Jane Eyre*, and the Burden of Romance," and in doing so, considers various aspects of women's work in *The Stone Diaries*. Both Johnson in "A Postmodernism of Resistance in *The Stone Diaries*" and Roy in "Autobiography as Critical Practice in *The Stone Diaries*" and "Brenda Bowman at Dinner with Judy Chicago: Feminism and Needlework in Carol Shields's *A Fairly Conventional Woman*," present complex feminist readings of women's work that will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper. Finally, in "Carol Shields and the Poetics of the Quotidian," Marta Dvorak equates Shields's work with Andy Warhol's by suggesting both blur "the distinction between the kitchen and art gallery" (66), and thus Shields creates a "vindication of banality" (66). I argue that Shields does not vindicate the banality of the domestic: she either suggests the domestic is not banal, by making it the site of a powerful female creativity, or she seeks to depict subjects who transcend the banality of the domestic through meaningful work.

As the title *A Fairly Conventional Woman* suggests, main character Brenda Bowman is initially presented as an average middle class woman, one whom Shields

makes unabashedly domestic. The novel begins with a detailed description of Brenda's day, down to details of the types of cereal she sets out for her husband and children and the kind of coffee grinder she uses (1). Shields depicts her in the middle of a ritual she performs every day that is also her recognized work. Shields alludes to the aspect of ritual by suggesting that Brenda's very descent down the stairs in the morning is a kind of "ceremony" (1). Brenda seems a willing part of the ceremony—she "glides—*glides*—down the wide oak stairs to make breakfast for her husband and children"—and the emphasis on *glides* suggests that the narrator is voicing Brenda's internal narrative of her own thoughts as she see herself gliding into her morning's work. Yet Shields undermines Brenda's apparent happiness by suggesting that, charmed as she may seem with her role in the domestic ceremony, Brenda may be trapped in that role. Brenda's possibly unconscious need for escape becomes apparent as she repeats "Philadelphia" over and over like a mantra while fixating on the flight schedule that will take her to a handicraft conference. Brenda's desire and need for escape become intrinsic not only to this scene but also to the entire book, prompting the question of what precisely Brenda is escaping. Shields provides the answer by couching Brenda's meditation on escape in the details of the everyday, the mundane, the immanence of life.

The flight schedule, "departure time, arrival date, flight number – all printed in her own hand on one of Jack's three-by-five index cards" (1), gives the first hint of the confinement of Brenda's life. In observing the card, she admits that she could remove many of the other items around it on the board but she likes the busyness implied by the crowded bulletin board: "She likes to think of herself as a busy woman. *Brenda Bowman* – *what a busy person!*" (1). Brenda's life here echoes Betty Friedan's stories of women

whose lives have become increasingly small, detailed in *The Feminine Mystique*. Citing Eleanor Wachtel's interview with Shields, Roy observes that "after having dreamed of fulfilling her society's domestic ideal, [Shields] was never able to 'doze off quite the same again' after she read *The Feminine Mystique* ("Autobiography" 137). In this initial glimpse of Brenda, Shields creates an image which could be an example taken directly out of Friedan's book. When Friedan quotes from an article entitled "How America Lives," the story of a woman whose life was likely typical for the time, she could be almost describing the life of Shields's character: "By 8:30 A.M., when my youngest goes to school, my whole house is clean and neat and I am dressed for the day, I am free to play bridge, attend club meetings, or stay home and read, listen to Beethoven, and just plain loaf" (57). Considering the image of women in popular magazines in the 1960's, Friedan asks, "where is the world of thought and ideas, the life of the mind and spirit? In the magazine image, women do no work except housework and work to get and keep a man" (30). With Brenda, Shields paints a character whose life seems to prompt a similar question. While *A Fairly Conventional Woman* begins with Brenda at work grinding coffee and setting out cereal, the companion novel, *Happenstance: The Husband's Story*, opens with her husband Jack, a historian, discussing with his colleague "the defining of history" (1).

Like the women with whom Friedan is concerned, Brenda initially does not seem to live in the world of thoughts and ideas where her husband finds his work; yet as Roy suggests, the novel is not merely a discussion of the traditional housewife but rather a "detailed and evocative" exploration of "the coming to consciousness of a woman artist" ("Brenda" 2). Ironically, it is Jack who feels a sense of stagnation in his professional

life, while Brenda, in making the transition into her new role as artist, begins to experience personal expansion even before going to Philadelphia. The sale of her first quilt is an empowering event which imparts to her a certain buoyant energy and confidence that pervades other areas of her life. She works for hours in her workroom, stops worrying about the children, and has increased confidence and even potency in sexuality. No longer demanding “soft words, endearments, subtlety” (29), she seems “newly gifted with a random sense of knowing” which leads to “nights of extravagant sexual adventure,” after which she often gives Jack’s shoulder “a light dismissing double pat” rather than lingering in his embrace (28-9). Brenda’s husband seems unaware that his wife’s work is the source of these changes; to him, her quilting is simply about “the creation of *things*” (30). What he fails to recognise is that for Brenda, the importance is in the creating, not in the things. It is also important to Brenda to earn an income from her quilts; when she considers buying an expensive new coat, she hesitates, but after considering the amount she and other quilters are paid for their work, she thinks, “[a] few days work – that was all; the thought gave her a glimpse of a dazzling new kind of power” (32-33). Shields makes a strong connection between creative and productive work and power, whether it be emotional, sexual, or economic power.

In her chapter on “The Married Woman,” de Beauvoir posits that “the bright ideal held up to [the engaged girl] is that of happiness, which means the ideal of quiet equilibrium in a life of immanence and repetition” (447). She might easily have been writing of Shields, who provided the following anecdote in an interview:

My mother mentioned to [Shields’s husband] Don, when she first met him, ‘I hope you’re going to encourage Carol to keep on writing.’ Don had

looked up blankly. Here we were engaged to be married, and I had never mentioned to him that I had done any writing. I sort of forgot about it for a while. I was just interested in being in love, and having a house, the whole *Ladies' Home Journal* thing. That was all I wanted. I can't believe it.

(Interview with Wachtel 16)

This story is hardly surprising given the fact that Shields was married in 1957. What is significant is her statement of disbelief that love and a house were all she wanted.

Feminism was not part of Shields's vocabulary at this point. In the same interview, Shields discusses a possible feminist reading of parts of her Masters thesis on Susanna Moodie she was completing at the University of Ottawa, but emphasizes, "I would never have thought I was a feminist in those days, by the way—1972–73" (26). Yet with the publication of *A Fairly Conventional Woman* in 1982, Shields's expression of disbelief at having wanted nothing more than to be in love and keep house manifests itself through Brenda's yearning for something more than the ideal of quiet equilibrium. The book was published early in Shields's career, and early in her expressions of feminist thought; thus, through Brenda she acknowledges a woman's hesitancy to want more, as Brenda recognizes her great excitement at the prospect of the trip as "both absurd and childish," to the point that it "makes her for the moment the object of her own pity" (2). She thinks of all the trips she has been on in her life: New York a few times, a trip to the Smoky Mountains as child, San Francisco for a conference with Jack, and even France (3). Clearly, Philadelphia means more to Brenda than just travel. She has begun the process of becoming an artist, but at the start of the book, her quilting is still regarded (by both her and Jack) as a craft – something closely connected to the home and the domestic.

Elevating her activities as a quilter to actual work *and* art is a key step in freeing Brenda from the potential stagnation that de Beauvoir closely connects to the immanence of the domestic. As de Beauvoir asserts,

Every subject plays his part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as a mode for transcendence; he achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out toward other liberties. There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence into the ‘*en-soi*’—the brutish life of subjection to given conditions. (xxviii-xxix)

By using the male pronoun, de Beauvoir indicates that this “reaching out toward other liberties” has typically been a male privilege; Shields, however, gives this privilege to Brenda. Thus, Brenda’s trip can be interpreted not merely as escape, but as part of a larger project or exploit that provides her with transcendence and rescue from potential stagnation, both as a person and as an artist. As Roy asserts, after attending the convention Brenda “is compelled to reinterpret quilting as an art rather than a craft and to view the resulting quilts as feminist statements rather than just ‘warm, attractive bed coverings’” (“Brenda” 3).

Brenda’s feminist reinterpretations of quilting are not enough, though, for Groening, who asserts that “Shields’ focus is on the quiet, unappreciated lives of artistic women who have lost themselves (albeit quite willingly) in their attention to their families,” and that the world she creates is one in which the “foibles” of a homogenous middle class are “laid bare with loving attention to detail” (14). While Groening aptly

notes the quietness of Shields's characters and her attention to detail, she misses the subtly embedded feminist messages found in Brenda's journey. Possibly "messages" is too strong a word for what Shields is doing at this point in her fiction, for *A Fairly Conventional Woman* is not openly didactic; she is not a writer given to feminist polemics. Yet Shields makes a powerful statement with Brenda by the end of the novel: she began the novel with Brenda quietly gliding down the stairs to prepare breakfast, but after a few days in Philadelphia, the book's main character is transformed:

I am not walking, Brenda said to herself; I am striding along. I am a forty-year-old woman, temporarily away from home, striding along a Philadelphia street wearing a quilt on my back.... Mrs. Brenda Bowman of Elm Park and Chicago, gliding along, leaving a streak of indelible colour on the whitened street and trailing behind her the still more vivid colours of – what? Strength, purpose, certainty. And a piercing apprehension of what she might have been or might still become.... Forty years of preparing – a waste, a waste, but one that could be rectified, if she could only imagine how. (123)

There is nothing quiet about this moment of awakening, and, in fact, the narrator asserts that "there was something epic in her wide step" (123). Suddenly Brenda is thinking of The Winged Victory of Samothrace, which she and Jack had seen in France. In *A Studio of One's Own*, Roberta White discusses *A Fairly Conventional Woman* along with several other stories and novels that "carry forward Virginia Woolf's suggestion...that there is not a strict dividing line between the domestic arts and serious art; they challenge the supposedly uncrossable barriers between traditional domestic activities and 'high

art” (214). Brenda striding – *gliding* – down the street wearing her quilt and thinking about a symbol of high art is an example of Shields playfully crossing the barrier of which White writes.

This passage depicts a moment of awakening that may mirror Shields’s own awakening. In the Wachtel interview she states, “This is what I always think, I woke up too late.... I’m one of these women in between. Like Brenda Bowman. Too late to be an old-style woman and I’m too late to be a new-style woman” (37). Yet clearly, it is not too late for Brenda to be a new-style woman (might one say *feminist*?). While it is not apparent where Brenda will go, as an artist or feminist, the power of this moment on the street comes from the fact that she has taken possession of her art; her work has brought her to a new place of transcendence where she is suddenly thinking about art and its potential power. Just as Brenda considers how to rectify her sleepy years by an act of imagination, Shields too makes up for sleepy years with a great imagining of women’s lives, with increasingly strong feminist messages. The message in *A Fairly Conventional Woman* is clear: this story was never about a woman who lost herself in willing attention to her family, but about a woman who found a new aspect of herself in newfound attention to her art. Hall observes that Shields highlights “the impression of sexual energy which dominates Brenda’s newest quilt and secures the bond of marriage” (44). This comment suggests that Hall still sees Brenda’s art as a part of her domestic role as wife, rather than as a means of transcending prescribed gender roles. Yet de Beauvoir asserts that “traditional marriage does not invite woman to transcend herself with [the husband]; it confines her in immanence, shuts her up within the circle of herself” (448).

Art/work allows Brenda to step outside the circle of herself and her family and engage with the transcendent world of ideas and thoughts.

In contrast to Brenda Bowman, Daisy Goodwill Flett of the critically acclaimed *The Stone Diaries* could be described as a quiet woman who willingly loses herself in her family. Johnson argues that Shields “undergirds postmodern style and content with the more specific story of the thwarted (white, middle-class) female self in twentieth-century North America” (204). Yet Johnson also recognizes in Daisy the “presence of alternatives to history, and to the story one is assigned by the traditionally gendered rules of society”; these alternatives to history allow Shields to take on the “larger task of reimagining cultural history” (215). Thus, in *The Stone Diaries*, “history is based on ‘women’s’ life landmarks – births, marriage, love, and the development of a particular family – rather than wars, drawings of national borders” and other things generally thought essential in traditionally male dominated histories (Johnson 215). Significantly, though, in her list of women’s life landmarks, Johnson provides those markers one would expect to find in a woman’s history – marriage, family and so on – but leaves out *work*. While I certainly agree with Johnson that in creating Daisy, Shields does reimagine cultural history by making traditional women’s landmarks worthy of history, she also demonstrates a concern with what Rachel Blau Duplessis refers to as “the other side of a well-known tale, the elements of women’s existence that have never been revealed” (3). One of these often unrevealed elements is the role of meaningful work in a woman’s life.

The Stone Diaries begins with a table of contents which at first glance does not seem to suggest that the novel will contain any surprising revelations about female existence. However, close examination of the list suggests that Shields might indeed

embark on a quest for the “the other side,” or at least a different side of the tale. All but one title in the Contents list has a single year behind it – “Birth, 1905,” “Marriage, 1927,” and so on. Only the entry titled “Work” has a range of years following it: “1955-1964.” These dates and titles are not arbitrary; “Marriage, 1927” is conspicuously dated eleven years before “Love, 1936.” Similarly, the family tree that is referred to at the top of the Contents and immediately precedes it shows that Daisy’s husband, Barker, dies in 1955. One might expect the chapter titled “Sorrow” to share the date of Barker’s death, but instead “Work” *begins* in 1955. “Sorrow” begins in 1965, shortly *after* the end of work. Shields is signaling several things here: first, love and marriage do not necessarily go together, and, more importantly, they may not necessarily be as central to the novel as work.

In *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth Century Women Writers*, Duplessis writes of the recent past when “the rightful end of women in novels was social—successful courtship, marriage—or judgment of her sexual and social failure—death” (1). Shields immediately signals that she will not necessarily pursue the rightful end of women in novels, by placing marriage and courtship at the beginning of the book, and thus defusing their traditional importance. Although the first chapter of *Stone Diaries* is titled “Birth, 1905,” and does indeed begin with Daisy’s birth, it is also the quiet and even erotic story of her parents’ courtship and early marriage: “Oh how I love you and with all my heart,” Daisy’s father, Cuyler Goodwill, declares to her mother, Mercy (16). Walking home in the evening and thinking about the night he will spend with Mercy, Cuyler looks at the houses he passes and notes that “[a]t one time he would have looked at such houses and imagined nothing but misery within. Now he knows

better. Now he has had a glimpse of paradise and sees it everywhere” (36). While his idea of paradise has to do with the realization that “love lies in his grasp” (35), along with the ensuing erotic pleasures, Mercy’s “particular notion of paradise,” in contrast, is “standing in the murderously hot back kitchen of her own house, concocting and contriving, leaning forward and squinting at the fine print of the cookery book” (2). In a subversion typical of this book, Shields writes the “rightful end” of love and domesticity into the beginning of the novel. In stark contrast to the erotic and domestic pleasures of the Goodwill household is the life of Clarentine Flett, Mercy’s closest neighbor, who, miserable in her domestic role, abruptly leaves her husband and eventually starts a successful business selling plants she grows herself. Shields reveals that Clarentine has read *Jane Eyre*, one of the novels Duplessis discusses as an example of the typical endings for women in (and out of) fiction. Duplessis quotes Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic*, suggesting that “the ideological underpinnings of the old plot have not been threatened seriously: the experience for women characters is still primarily tied to the erotic and the familial” (4). This criticism is echoed in critics’ views of Shields, who has faced “repeated accusations of dwelling on domesticity, and [is] frequently linked with marital compromise and happy endings” (Glaser 366). Shields both recognizes and subverts Gilbert and Gubar’s “old plot,” by writing of women who do end up fulfilling erotic and familial roles, but she creates room for other roles by placing the “happy ending” of marriage at the beginning of the novel, and simultaneously undermining it with the unhappy Clarentine Flett, who like Jane Eyre, “seems to want...the same as what a man wants: an adequate field for her endeavors” (Osland 103).

While in some senses both Daisy and her mother, Mercy, take their rightful social place in the novel by fulfilling the erotic and familial of which Gilbert and Gubar write, neither is entirely comfortable in these realms, and both have other “endeavors,” or work, which at times they find far more fulfilling than their roles as wives. Mercy “never knows what to expect or what to make of her husband’s cries” during sex, and feels “profoundly buried, as though she, Mercy Goodwill, is no more than a beating of blood inside the vault of her flesh” (7). The sense of being buried, despite the fact that she is much larger than her husband, is related to immanence and the suppression of self. There is a similar sense of self-suppression and discomfort in Daisy’s role in the erotic and familial. In the sub-section entitled “Mrs. Flett’s Intimate Relations with her Husband,” while awaiting her husband’s return, Daisy is struck by a sudden “gust of grief” and “she lies stranded, genderless, ageless, alone” (189). “[U]naware of her tears...and the depth of her loneliness” (191), Barker arrives and commences lovemaking, which consists of penetration and a few minutes of “rhythmic rocking” (191), during which Daisy’s mind wanders over “pregnancies, vacations, meals, illnesses” and the thought that “she will never again be surprised. It has become, almost, an ambition....Houseplants, after all, thrive in a vacuum or geography and climate – why shouldn’t she?” (191-2).

Daisy cannot entirely resign herself to living in the vacuum of her lonely marriage because she actually does have a field for her endeavors: the garden. In the very next section, titled “Mrs. Flett’s House and Garden,” the narrator, who may be Daisy, describes a house that reflects “some insufficiency in herself” (194), in contrast to a garden that “[s]he lives for...if the truth were known” (194). It is a garden “enchanted in its look of settledness and its caressing movements of shade and light” in which

visitors “sometimes feel their hearts lock into place for an instant...paradise indeed” (196). There are caresses here not found in Daisy’s intimate relationship with her husband, and a paradise that hearkens back to her father’s experience of the erotic, but also to her mother’s experience of the artistry of cooking. While working in the kitchen, *her* kitchen, a sense of transcendence surrounds Mercy. She was, Daisy as narrator intones, “like an artist – years later this form of artistry” would become “perfectly clear to me” (2), and one wonders if both the recognition of this artistry and the assertion that “every last body on earth has a particular notion of paradise, and this was hers, standing in the murderously hot back kitchen of her own house, concocting and contriving” (2), comes as a result of her own artistry found in the garden.² In discussing the above quotation, Johnson says, “[t]raditionally female art forms in *The Stone Diaries* – the folk arts of cooking and gardening – reiterate the alchemy of women’s imaginations on everyday materials.... Daisy inherits her mother’s talent for making art from things of the earth” (206). Citing the following passage,

And the raspberries; mention must be made of the raspberries. Does Mrs. Barker Flett understand the miracle she has brought into being in the city of Ottawa on the continent of North America in this difficult northern city in the mean, toxic, withholding middle years of our century? Yes; for once she understands fully (195-6),

Johnson suggests that “her ability to transform dire earthly conditions into cultivatable soil is pointed out by the narrator as the one activity through which Daisy becomes able to perceive her own impact on the world around her, making gardening both sensual and subversive” (206).

It is not enough, however, for Daisy to simply perceive her own impact on the world; her most fulfilling work begins after Barker dies and she is able to turn her art – gardening – into recognized work. Shields conveys the part of her life titled “Work, 1955-1964” entirely through letters, most of them fan mail written to Daisy once she takes over her husband’s gardening column after his death. The fan mail suggests what a departure this job is for Daisy, the most obvious difference being that she is suddenly recognized for her work. During the “Motherhood” chapter, the most detailed image of Daisy at work is that of her cooking supper, after which she finds herself suddenly exhausted at the dinner table, and notices that no one has asked for second helpings (162). It seems a tiny thing, but her family asking for seconds would have been a confirmation, a recognition of her efforts. De Beauvoir acknowledges this need for recognition: “The validity of the cook’s work,” she asserts, “is to be found only in the mouths of those around her table; she needs their approbation, demands that they appreciate her dishes and call for seconds” (455). But the recognition of the service and even the attempted art of cooking is by no means guaranteed to Daisy. By contrast, when she begins writing, in no time at all, and with seemingly little effort, she wins accolades and respect from her editor who refers to her work as “solid in the best journalistic sense” (204); a female fan who thinks Daisy’s advice is better than the advice of her late husband, a respected botanist (205); and a male fan who thanks her for giving his yard the “immortality of print” (205). These people recognize Daisy as a person whose work outside the home has impact, rather than as simply someone’s wife or mother.

While Shields clearly recognizes in Daisy the importance of a woman having an identity outside of her familial role, not all critics have necessarily recognized Shields’s

implicit feminist commentary in Daisy's identity formation. Coral Ann Howells describes Shields as possessing an "unassuming feminism" (*Contemporary* 80), while she recognizes other critics' views of Daisy as "a decentered subject whose identity is invented for her by others" (84). It is a far from unassuming feminism that builds an entire book around a woman whose identity has been invented for her by others. When de Beauvoir theorizes that men compel women "to assume the status of Other" (xxix), or propose to "stabilize [them] as object" (xxix), it becomes clear that the roles of mother and wife can function as forms of both otherness and objectification when they subsume the identity of the woman who fills them. While Howells argues that Shields's intention is to "demonstrate that through the opinions of others... surrounding us, our identity is constructed as intelligible" (84), I would argue, in contrast, that Shields's intention is to demonstrate that without the possibility of self-invention found in both work and art, women are in danger of being decentered objects. It is thus significant that Howells seems uninterested in the possibility that Daisy is able to invent herself through her gardening column. She notes that "[a]t no time does Daisy question the categories that mark her as daughter, wife (twice), mother" (85), and mentions that Daisy "conscientiously learns the appropriate behavior for these various domestic roles through reading *Good Housekeeping*" and similar women's magazines.³ Notably, Daisy's identity as a columnist (despite that fact that work occupies a span of years in the table of contents of her life story) is not mentioned in the list of categories which mark Daisy's life, or as a defining aspect of self-definition or transformation (just as Johnson, in her discussion of Daisy's life, omits the landmark of work). Similarly, Hall writes that Daisy "builds her life as wife, mother, and garden columnist by taking up available materials

and cultivating them; and like her father's carved stones, none of her accomplishments is particularly original or significant" (45). The question this statement raises is, *significant to whom?* Daisy's work is significant and life changing *to her*. Hall suggests that Daisy's father's stone tower is an attempt "to escape in transcendence" (45), but she does not recognize the same potential for transcendence in Daisy's gardening and writing.⁴

When Daisy loses the column to a male writer, her daughter Alice seems to diagnose accurately the ensuing depression while also demonstrating its cause. "She knew, for a brief while," Alice says of the time in which Daisy wrote the column, "what it was to do a job of work. The shaping satisfaction" (240). Alice reveals a great deal here; by suggesting that writing a column is a "job of work" while running a household is not, she espouses the view likely to have been held by the dominant patriarchal society. Yet simultaneously, in recognizing the lack of "shaping satisfaction" that paid jobs held for so many women, she sides with Betty Friedan, who refused to believe that devoting every bit of one's energy to every need of a household was anything more than glorified servitude. Daisy's transformation from housewife to columnist represents the gap between the often unrecognized work of household duties and recognized – paid – work.⁵ In her article "Rethinking Identity and Coalitional Politics, Insights from Simone de Beauvoir," Stavro refers to the Hegelian system of thought which suggests that "to be systematically misrecognized or not recognized by members of the dominant culture is an injury to the self and a harm that sustains inferiority" (442). If one applies Hegel's theory of the effects of systematic lack of recognition to Daisy's life, as one justifiably can, then her sudden catapulting into the world of work recognized by the dominant male culture

makes her sudden blossoming that much more powerful and its loss that much more poignant.

After losing her identity as Mrs. Green Thumb, Daisy fades back into non-work related titles – titles that always define her in relation to others: mother, grandmother, aunt. Her depression seems a prolonged resistance, albeit a passive one, to this subsuming of her newly found self, but it is a form of resistance that she cannot sustain. Her only recourse is to return to the unrecognized work she did previously as wife and mother: “she understands, and accepts, the fact that her immense unhappiness is doomed to irrelevance anyway.... She’d like to tie a crisp apron around her waist once again, peel a pound of potatoes in three minutes flat and put them soaking in cold water” (263).

Shields suggests a great deal with Daisy’s diagnosis and solution to her emotional crisis. First is the recognition that the wrenching away of Daisy’s first job outside the home, and the importance she attached to it, is perceived by those around her as irrelevant to her depression. Male worth has long been associated with gainful employment; for a man to lose his job is tantamount to a significant loss of self. Shields details Barker’s fear of the coming idleness of retirement, as he wonders, “what happens to men when their work is taken from them?” (163). She asks the same question for women through Daisy. Daisy’s recognition of the irrelevance of her loss in the eyes of her society shows how little women are allowed to derive from work in terms of personal enrichment and identity.

As Daisy returns to the domestic work of the home, she experiences something close to resignation, maybe even defeat. Shields once said, “I am interested in writing away the invisibility of women’s lives, looking at writing as an act of redemption” (“A View” 28). Daisy never quite attains the redemption from invisibility, or the

transcendence that once seemed so close through her work; she is, if anything, *less* visible by the end of the novel. Her first-person voice is heard less and less, and her first name is barely even used – she is simply Mrs. Flett or Grandma Flett. Roy discusses the way that “*The Stone Diaries* constructs Daisy Goodwill Flett almost entirely in relation to others” “[a]s a way of illustrating [the] sacrifice of individuality” that women have traditionally undergone (“Autobiography” 124). As Daisy’s death approaches, she is surrounded by the debris of everyday life and the fading body:

Everything makes her cross, the frowziness of dead flowers in a vase, the smell of urine, her own urine. She’s turned into a bitter hag, but well, not really, you see. Inside she’s still a bowl of vibrating Jello, wise old Mrs. Green Thumb, remember her? Someone you can always call on, count on, phone in an emergency, etc. (335)

With this significant reference to Mrs. Green Thumb, Shields reminds the reader of that pivotal moment in time when Daisy’s work allowed her to transcend the everyday, transcend her pre-ordained role of wife and mother, and for a time step out of the realm of immanence. This transcendence reaches to the end of her life and brings a sense of redemption to the fading of her body and mind, a redemption that Carol Shields brings again and again to the women in her novels.

Shields’s last novel, *Unless*, has been described as, “a brave, strikingly feminist examination of goodness, loss, family love, and the process of putting words to paper” (Roy, “*Unless*” 125). Roy’s use of the phrase “strikingly feminist” is important, for more than any of Shields’s other novels, this book seems to present her most explicit feminist discussion. The contemplation of the idea of goodness versus greatness is central to her

main character, Reta, mirroring the language of de Beauvoir's immanence and transcendence. The focal point for Reta's anguished contemplations of otherness and greatness is her daughter, Norah, who has inexplicably abandoned her life and family to sit on a Toronto street corner wearing a sign that reads "GOODNESS." For Reta, Norah is the embodiment of female powerlessness, and her speculation on the causes of Norah's self-destruction nearly becomes all-consuming. Reta's work as a writer becomes a tool for understanding the loss of her child, whether she is writing her sunny novel as a coping mechanism or writing letters she will likely not send to those she sees as perpetrators of the patriarchal system that contributes to Norah's self-enforced otherness.

Reta's work writing helps her not only to transcend her devastation, but also express and understand woman's need for transcendence and what it is to be consigned to mere goodness. Shields's idea that women are consigned to goodness and denied the potential for greatness given to men is important, for it illuminates and illustrates de Beauvoir's distinction between immanence and transcendence. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines transcendence as "surmounting, or rising above; excelling, surpassing": in other words, *greatness*. Reta's new editor, Arthur Springer, says of her novel's protagonist, Alicia, "my devotion to her is enormous," and what attracts him to the character is "the way she has of sitting still in a chair. Just sitting. Her generosity, that's part of it. Her tolerance too" (212). He sums up his feelings for this character in a strangely romantic way, saying, "what really makes me want to take her in my arms is her goodness" (212). He conveys the idea that she is attractive because of her passivity, her ability to sit and do nothing, a quality that Reta never mentions. Her goodness renders her actionless, and therefore insignificant.

Springer's reaction to Danielle Westerman, the brilliant feminist scholar with whom Reta has had a long professional relationship, seems to indicate that insignificance is related to goodness, which in turn indicates mediocrity in work. Of all the characters in the novel, Danielle Westerman, as the most published and recognized in the literary world, seems most likely to attract Springer's notice and attain the title of greatness. Yet Springer refers to her as "the old girl" and has only the vaguest idea of her work, as it relates to a male editor who had, according to Springer, once given her "a helping hand" (283). Reta is clearly bothered by her editor's failure to recognize the worth of Westerman's work, and subsequently has her character Alicia muse, "Face it, goodness has no force; none" (257). Springer may not define Westerman in terms of moral goodness, but his casual reference to her as "old girl" certainly removes the force of her accomplishments – her greatness – thereby relegating her to the realm of immanence; her work, he implies, is good but not great.

By comparison, Springer does view Roman, the male character in Reta's novel, as capable of greatness. He sees Roman as having a complex history: "His parents were immigrants. They sacrificed their cultural roots.... He somehow got educated, became a musician" (285). His history suggests depth and seriousness, but also hardship and difficulty, which Roman has somehow managed to transcend. Roman, in Springer's mind, is destined for an epic pilgrimage to get in touch with his "heritage" in Albania; meanwhile, Alicia is at home talking to the cat and making casseroles (285). Roman has history and an "ever active brain" (285); Alicia has only goodness and the ability to sit on a chair without moving.

Possibly the most significant of Springer's distinctions between Alicia and Roman is the disparagement of Alicia in terms of her work: she writes about fashion. Clearly Roman's work of playing a trombone, which involves silly spats over his inadvertent frizzing of the hair of the bassoonist (258), is no more serious or noble than Alicia's work as a fashion writer, yet through Springer's reaction to typically female work, Shields creates a parody of traditional patriarchal views of the (un)importance of women's work. Springer tells Reta that a reader would never accept Alicia as "a decisive fulcrum of a work of art" because she "writes fashion articles" and "makes rice casseroles" (285-6). Because her work outside the home is decidedly unmasculine and she does domestic things, she cannot be the "moral centre" (285) of Reta's book.

This phrase, "moral centre," is of prime importance for it echoes Norah's belief that "Madame Bovary was forced to surrender her place as the moral centre of [Flaubert's] novel" (217). Norah has a conflict regarding Madame Bovary's place with a male professor shortly before abandoning her studies and fleeing to her life on the street. In including a similar conflict between Reta and Springer over Alicia's potential as a moral centre, Shields creates a feminist connection between Reta and Norah. She expands this connection to include all women in what she calls "uncoded otherness" (270). This idea of uncoded otherness is found in one of the key passages of the book, one that powers Reta's anger at the patriarchal world, and also illuminates all of Shields's other work. "What I believe," Reta says, is this:

[T]he world is split in two between those who are handed power at birth, at gestation, encoded with a seemingly random chromosome determinate that says yes for ever and ever, and those like Norah, like Danielle

Westerman, like my mother, like my mother-in-law, like me, like all of us who fall into the uncoded otherness in which the power to assert ourselves and claim our lives has been displaced by a compulsion to shut down our bodies and seal our mouths and be as nothing against the fireworks and streaking stars of the Big Bang. (270)

With the phrase “random chromosome,” Shields emphasizes the arbitrariness of gender inequality while underscoring the deeply damaging results of the myth that inequality between the sexes is genetically ordained. The cosmic reference at the end of the passage is also significant as the transcendent can be defined as a cosmic power or deity “permanently pervading and sustaining the universe” (OED), while an immanent action can be defined as “an act which is performed entirely within the mind of the subject, and produces no external effect” (OED). The displacement of power and the female compulsion to “shut down” are suggestive of the kind of passivity that Arthur Springer admires and imagines in Alicia, and that Norah comes to embody. Norah may not speak in terms of pervasive cosmic power, but she does speak in huge terms of the “the world” and the earth’s tides (129) and “existence” (128); at the same time she says, “I’m trying to get past the little things but I can’t” (131). Norah, it seems, is caught between transcendence and immanence. She becomes an overarching exemplification of this dilemma as Shields brings together these two principles and presents a unified sense of her vision both of the dangers of immanence and of a woman’s potential for transcendence.

For the women in each of the novels examined above, work, particularly artistic work, represents an act of transcendence, a rising above the “problem of how to get

through a thousand ordinary days” (*Stone Diaries* 263). Brigitte Glaser asserts that “Over the years, Shields has become a more gender- and politically minded writer, although her convictions only occasionally emerge, at times only at a second reading” (367). The subtlety of Shields’s feminist convictions is evident in *A Fairly Convention Woman*, in which Brenda’s feminist awakening, which is as gradual as Shields’s own self-described slow awakening, happens only in conjunction with artistic work. Similarly, the art of gardening leads to Daisy’s transformation into a woman with a purpose beyond household chores and childcare. Her job as Mrs. Green Thumb may seem ordinary, but the letters she receives demonstrate a job, even a simple job, done with surpassing excellence and *recognized* for its excellence. This same picture of excellence is found first in Daisy’s mother, and, in both portrayals, there is the feminist suggestion that the truest and best experiences of women may not have anything at all do with sex, love, and marriage. Finally, with *Unless*, both Shields’s feminist philosophy and fascination with work are made explicit in Reta, who states:

I passionately believe a novelist must give her characters work to do. Fictional men and women tend, in my view, to collapse unless they’re observed doing their work, *engaged* with their work, the architect seen in a state of concentration at the drafting table, the dancer thinking each step as it’s performed, the computer programmer tracing the path between information and access.... [T]he great joy of detective fiction is watching the working hero being busy every minute with work; work in crime novels is always in view, work is the whole point. (*Unless* 264)

The novel is a study of Reta engaged with her work. She uses her characters, Alicia and Roman, to provide outlet for and exploration of her feminist concerns, particularly goodness and greatness, which are ultimately embodied in Norah's self-imposed immanence. At the end of *Unless*, Reta says of her next book, "I want the book to have the low moaning tone of an orchestral trombone and then to move upward toward a transfiguration of some kind, the nature of which has yet to be worked out" (319). This passage is a lovely piece of metafiction, for it says something about Shields's characters who are always moving upwards toward a transfiguration or transcendence of some kind. In de Beauvoir's final chapter, titled "Liberation: The Independent Woman," she asserts that the independent woman "is productive, active, she regains her transcendence; in her projects she concretely affirms her status as subject" (680). Through her depictions of women's work and art, Shields affirms and celebrates the productive, active, transcendental, and powerful in the lives of her female subjects.

Notes

1. Shields credits Millett with telling us “that we didn’t have to take Henry Miller seriously any longer, and what a relief that was!” (“A View From the Edge” 27).
2. My argument here echoes Roy’s, in which she asserts that “*The Stone Diaries*, like Shields’s other books, is in part an exploration and affirmation of the domestic aspects of life often left out of literature, but it also provides a critique of enforced domesticity” (“Autobiography” 135).
3. In “*The Stone Diaries, Jane Eyre, and the Burden of Romance*” Dianne Osland, like Roy and Howells, discusses the role of women’s magazines, commenting that “Daisy buries herself in the domestic. ‘Deeply, fervently, sincerely desiring to be a good wife and mother’ ([*TSD*] 185), she reads every issue of the twentieth-century’s conduct books, *Good Housekeeping*, *McCalls*, and the *Canadian Home Companion*” (101).
4. Howells also makes a connection between transcendence and the traditionally male work of structure building in “Larry’s A/Mazing Spaces,” as she asserts that it is “in the artificial space of the maze” that Shields “relocates the...experience of the sublime, with all its rapture and self-transcendence” (132).
5. In the interview with Wachtel, Shields discusses her first paid job as an editorial assistant, saying, “having a job for me is still a very important thing because I never thought I would in all those years I was home with children.... But I did this job at home in my own little work room.... It was what people call a ‘jobette.’ Even now, this little job I have at the university means a great deal to me. I teach only one course – anything. I’m at the bottom of the pile so I teach whatever is left over [writing or literature]. But that was very important to my self-esteem that someone would actually hire me and pay

me” (27). It is interesting to note Shields’s deprecating language — “little work room,” “little job,” “jobette” — as if at this point in her life (1989), she is carefully subordinating paid work outside the home beneath work in the home. Yet a few years later, the weight of this experience finds expression in the great value Daisy places on her job as columnist.

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